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ABSTRACT

Out of a need for students to find a sense of belonging, Bainbridge College (Georgia) has started a peer-tutoring program, which recruits, trains and retains tutors of quality. The program has been in place for four years and has been very successful. Not only do tutors get the chance to help others with schoolwork, they also achieve personal goals. Peer-support leads to personal academic accomplishment, increased self-esteem, rewards, and recognition. Four components make up the program: (1) campus-wide tutor recruiting and learning center utilization (all students and staff must submit applications and take part in interviews to become tutors); (2) training that achieves a standard of performance, develops accountability, and fosters professional behavior (weekly training sessions for tutors exist); (3) learning community traditions (tutors express to future applicants the benefits of becoming tutors); and (4) fostering self-assessment and transition through mentoring (tutors are mentored by directors to achieve goals). Because of this program, student retention is up by five percent over the last three years, and many students now use the learning center for educational support. (CJW)

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As Successful as the County Fair: Bainbridge College's Peer Tutor Program

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As Successful as the County Fair: BC's Peer Tutor Program

The most consistent challenge in our rural, commuter educational setting is developing a sense of belonging among the students. That challenge comes because students do not perceive themselves to have the time to become involved with other students or campus activities. Also, most commuters come into the educational setting with divergent goals and assumptions. One perspective that they all seem to hold in common is that they do not see their studies as a life-changing event. They do not envision that the taking of a few courses will develop a new perspective, group of friends, or life-involvement. They see their class work or their program of study as the only component of their college experience. In their view, only the resulting certification will provide the ticket to an improved life. Often, even "traditional college bound" students are already employees, parents, and spouses. Such roles exert an influence toward family and community rather than campus involvement.

With such roles and obligations overarching students' college experience, building a peer tutorial program that effectively recruits, trains and retains tutors of quality is a challenge. Bainbridge College's Learning Center has a successful history. In its four-year service it has become a place of welcome, persistent effort, and excellence. The approximately seventy-five tutors who have served the Center were diligent in building a strong reputation. Consequently, current tutors join an established team and can achieve personal goals while helping others. This creates a proud learning tradition in which the entire campus shares.

The Learning Center's success pivots on using the advantages of technology for self-paced learning and classroom support, while using the historically successful approach of rural education: the peer-teaching/learning model of the one-room school house. Peer-support that leads to personal and academic accomplishments, increased self-esteem, rewards, recognition, and a sense of belonging occur semester after semester despite a constantly changing, but small student population. The four components of our program that assure such success follow.

Campus-wide tutor recruiting and Learning Center utilization

All students, whether professor, tutor, or self-nominated must submit an application, present themselves for an interview, undergo the required pre-screening tests, and view introductory video programs about tutoring.

The Center is a peer tutorial center. The primary way to initiate student access is through peer tutors who introduce the program and themselves and thus create heightened awareness and expectations. Tutors visit every class at the beginning of each term. As scheduling permits, they sit in on classes and talk to students before and afterward to encourage additional academic engagement. Finally, they meet with their respective faculty and with the Learning Center director to assure effective academic collaboration.

Training achieves a standard of performance, develops accountability, and fosters professional behaviors

Our common standard is shaped during training and weekly meetings. Training for all tutors begins with the application process and takes place with every interaction that the Directors and tutors have with one another. The first training session of the semester is a six-hour session. Weekly, mandatory, tutor meetings and tutor's self-paced

video instruction continues the training. New tutors work with a peer-mentor who teaches records management, is a discussion partner for the tutoring videos and teaches Learning Center culture. Chiefly, the training tools are our high expectations, positive attitude, and our openness to tutors' suggestions for Center goals, improvements, evaluation processes, and student and faculty interactions.

Tutors are expected to be: learners both in their own classes and in the subject they are tutoring; models of effective student habits; managers of their time; dependable; willing to face problems and accept the challenge of finding a solution; professional in their tutoring role, i.e. view it as a job not as an extra-curricular activity; and, leaders of the learning community and the campus. Fulfilling these expectations they develop a personal commitment, willingness to be evaluated (seeing evaluation as an opportunity for professional growth) and staying power.

Learning Community Traditions

What draws people into increased involvement and encourages a greater commitment than a student may have initially anticipated making? Tutors express their reasons in the following ways: we are given ownership in the Center's work, enjoy the confidence of our director that we can do quality work, and achieve recognition through our work. These appear to be the lure of prospective tutors and the crown jewels for those who stay the course in our learning community.

The Learning Center is centrally located. Photo introductions on the bulletin board and tutor t-shirts afford easy recognition that permits students to approach tutors comfortably. Classroom introductions, supported by faculty, encourage early utilization of learning support, study groups and academic etiquette. Tutor-created business cards

announce a tutor's availability and Learning Center hours. The director's (usually welcome) cookies are awarded to tutors creating ingenious, eye-catching business cards. Professor quotes and photos on the Learning Center bulletin board also increase student interest and participation. The *Fatlighter Express* may feature faculty profiles, programs of study and administrators.

A Tutor Award and an Achievement Award, presented at the college's honor's night, recognize long-term achievements. STAR tutors are recognized each term. Qualities recognized among other are taking personal initiative, finding ways to improve services, outstanding work with a client, and effectively managing various responsibilities. STAR Tutor recognition serves three ends: (1) to make the tutor feel special by wearing a badge that designates the tutor's status and eating lunch with the director; (2) to experience greater leadership opportunities by conducting an upcoming meeting and serving as mentor for new tutors; and, (3) to realize a greater sense of ownership in the Center by serving on the interview and selection committee for new tutors.

Tutors select Master Students each semester and honor them at the last tutor meeting. Their certificates and photos appear on the bulletin board for added public recognition.

Traditions, however small, are an effective way to create a sense of belonging and continuity for a program. Some of the tutor's favorite traditions of the program are sharing Tutor Brags announced at each meeting and placed on the Brag Board; tutor social activities including supper at the Director's house, tutor spring picnic to which faculty and families are invited. Summer volleyball game and lunch; service projects performed once

per term. Finally, a yearly photo collage of the "tutor class" becomes a permanent installation in the Center.

Fostering Self-assessment and Transition through Mentoring

Meetings and group activities can develop community and create a positive learning environment for clients. However, to be complete in its mission, the program must include one further component: the director's mentoring of tutors toward self-assessment and goal setting. Four tutor/director meetings elicit conversations to that end: *Goal Setting, Academic and Personal Progress, Observation and Assessment,* and *Summary* or *Exit* meeting. The exit meeting invariably centers on the tutor's transfer process in order that the director can write letters of commendation or make contact with other directors on behalf of the tutors.

The program's four-year track record speaks for itself: student retention is up by five percent over the last three years. Thirty eight to forty percent of the students use the Center for learning support. The average tenure of tutors is two to three terms. Student evaluations give high ratings of satisfaction. The Learning Center's program shows that an actively and systematically developed program results in a continuity of student learning, raises self-esteem, builds leadership in peer-tutors while building community.